

Peers at our livestock, fishy-eyed.

I didn't say a word. I was staring  
at the cow in the straw. Not our cow, but Tam's—  
Tam Bywater's cow—  
mangy, ribs showing, and breathing like  
bellows,  
a beast not worth the price of its hide.

And Mother is scraping and fawning,  
"If you please, sir . . .  
begging your lordship's pardon."  
There's Mother, so meek, and blind in one eye,  
her hair falling out, and her shift full of holes—  
making a fool of his lordship.

Look the best of the pigs—  
we've chosen the same, in his place.  
Mother kissed his hand,  
watched him ride off,  
till dark,  
Paradise.

## OTHO

THE MILLER'S SON



Father is the miller<sup>1</sup>  
As his father was of old,  
And I shall be the miller,  
When my father's flesh is cold.  
I know the family business—  
It's been drummed into my head:  
How to cheat the hungry customer  
And earn my daily bread.

Oh, God makes the water, and the water makes the river,  
And the river turns the mill wheel  
and the wheel goes on forever.  
Every man's a cheater, and so every man is fed,  
For we feed upon each other,  
when we seek our daily bread.

My father is a hard man,  
Muscular and stout.  
He swings a heavy cudgel  
Whenever he walks out.  
My grandfather was like him  
A man of gain and sin:  
They found him in the millpond  
With his skull bashed in.

<sup>1</sup> Millers were unpopular men. The diet of medieval peasants was composed largely of bread. If the miller was dishonest, the peasants had less to eat, and no way to fight back, since grinding grain at home was against the law.

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*<sup>2</sup> Millers and bakers  
had all sorts of tricks  
to cheat the villein of  
his daily bread.  
Adulterating the flour  
with chalk was one.*

*<sup>3</sup> The miller was  
socially superior to  
peasants and villeins,  
but greatly inferior to  
the lord. A miller's son  
like Otho was in an  
odd position—far  
beneath the children of  
nobility, but too "good"  
to play with common  
children.*

Oh, God makes the water, and the water makes the river,  
And the river turns the mill wheel  
and the wheel goes on forever.  
I used to wonder why the peasants hated us so strong.  
They think we pick their pockets —  
and they're not far wrong.

Flour in the flour sack,  
Vermin in the flour.  
Peasants waiting by the mill,  
Hour after hour —  
They curse us as they stand in line,  
Enjoy their little talk.  
My father grinds their flour  
And replaces it with chalk.<sup>2</sup>

Oh, God makes the water, and the water makes the river,  
And the river turns the mill wheel  
and the wheel goes on forever.  
When you think about the matter,  
it's as good as any sermon,  
For the villeins feed the miller,  
and the miller feeds the vermin.

When I was only four years old,  
Still babyish and unsteady,  
I tried to play with common folk<sup>3</sup> —  
They hated me already.  
They knew I was my father's son —  
My father serves the lord.  
One day I'll show them hating me  
'S a thing they can't afford.

Flour in the flour sack,  
Worm in the flour.  
Flourants waiting by the mill,  
Hour after hour —  
To course us as they stand in line,  
In their little talk.  
The mill grinds their flour  
And marks it with chalk.<sup>2</sup>

the water, and the water makes the river,  
 the mill turns the mill wheel  
 and goes on forever.  
 About the matter,  
 sermon,  
 the miller,  
 the vermin.  
 old,

For every man's a sinner,  
And he wants his neighbor's grain.  
The peasant moves the boundary stone  
And steals the lord's demesne.<sup>4</sup>  
The miller steals the flour,  
And the baker steals the bread.  
We're hypocrites and liars —  
And we all get fed.

And half the world's a-thieving,  
and the other half's a-crawling.  
The Mouth of Hell is gaping wide,  
and all of us are falling.  
The Judgment Day is close at hand,  
the hellfires are burning.  
There's no way to retrace our steps,  
the mill wheel's turning—

For God made the water, and the water makes the river,  
And the river turns the mill wheel  
and the wheel goes on forever.  
My father used to beat me sore —  
I've learned that life is grim.  
And someday I will have a son — and God help him!

<sup>4</sup> The lord's demesne (pronounced "dim-MAIN") consisted of all his lands, including his strips in the three village fields. Since these strips of land ran alongside the strips belonging to the peasants, peasants were sometimes tempted to move the boundary stones in order to reap part of the lord's harvest.